



Northern Arizona
VA Health Care System

HealthTrends

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A clear look at cataracts

Centuries ago, people thought that whiteness in the pupil of the eye (a cataract) was a waterfall flowing from the brain. Today we know that cataracts are cloudy patches on the eye's lens. They are usually caused by chemical changes that happen as we age. For this reason, they are common among people older than 65.

Who is at risk?

In addition to advancing age, risk factors for cataracts include:

- smoking
- diabetes
- an injury to the eye
- corticosteroid medications, which may be used to treat lupus or asthma
- too much exposure to ultraviolet light
- too much exposure to radiation, such as X-rays

Research suggests that people can reduce their risk for cataracts if they wear a hat and sunglasses when outside, and eat foods rich in vitamins A, C and E, such as fruits and green leafy vegetables. Taking vitamins can also help supplement your diet. Of course, it's always recommended that you stop smoking.

Symptoms and treatment

A cataract progresses slowly and painlessly. Many people don't even realize they have one at first. But after a while, they may:

- experience blurred vision
- see poorly at night or in bright light
- see halos around lights



- notice that some colors (such as blues and reds) appear dull

New eyeglasses or medicated eye drops may help. But, doctors often recommend corrective surgery if a patient's vision is seriously affected.

During the operation—which is an outpatient procedure normally done under a local anesthetic—the surgeon replaces the eye's clouded lens with a permanent plastic one. More than 90 percent of patients experience improved eyesight as a result.

Surgery is not always the best choice. People who have other eye diseases may not be good candidates for the operation.

If you have cataracts, be sure to discuss all treatment options with your doctor to make the decision that's right for you.

You can prevent or correct many eye problems by seeing your doctor regularly and having a complete eye exam every one to two years.



Get active to ease osteoarthritis

If you have osteoarthritis, take a walk—or a swim or a bike ride. In fact, a variety of aerobic exercises will help to relieve pain, improve flexibility and maybe even decrease the need for painkillers.

That's good news for more than 21 million Americans who suffer from osteoarthritis, or degenerative joint disease that affects the hands, feet, knees and hips.

Osteoarthritis occurs when cartilage (tissue that connects bones at joints) wears, frays, ulcerates and, in some cases, disappears completely, leaving bare joints. Symptoms include morning stiffness, tenderness, loss of mobility and function, and creaking and cracking of joints—a term referred to as crepitus.

Although the causes of osteoarthritis are unknown, age, genetics and a lifetime of wear and

tear are thought to be culprits. Although no cure exists, much can be done to ease aches and improve movement.

If you have osteoarthritis, you already know how painful it can be just to tie a shoelace or bend down. It is possible to feel better by improving your diet, adding the right medications and supplements and starting an exercise program.

Begin by walking

You don't have to be a world-class athlete to benefit from exercise. Most people begin by putting on a good pair of sneakers and heading outdoors. Walking is one of the simplest, safest and cheapest ways to alleviate the symptoms of osteoarthritis. Take your time. Start slowly and increase your speed and distance to keep the exercise challenging, without being grueling. Try to make a schedule and stick to it.

If walking becomes boring, try swimming. This is another excellent choice, whether you do pool laps or take up aquatic exercise—stretching, walking and other workouts done in water.

Thanks to the buoyancy of water, it's much easier to move around. Hydrotherapy is also wonderfully soothing to sore and tired joints.

Ride your pain away

Another form of exercise to consider is bike riding, which will help to strengthen thighs and reduce the risk of knee injuries. If you're not up to riding on busy city streets, consider buying a stationary bike for your home or joining a health club. Spinning® classes have become the latest fitness craze and may just be the answer to pedal away your chronic pain.

Of course, it's always important to check with your doctor before you start exercising and to keep your physician informed of your progress.

If you have advanced osteoarthritis, consider working with a physical therapist. That person can show you proper exercise techniques to avoid further injury. Occupational therapists can also help you remain as mobile and independent as possible.

Walking is a step toward better health

Walking is the ultimate exercise. It's something you already know how to do. It's not overly demanding physically. It requires very little equipment. It can be done almost anywhere, anytime. And it can help prevent or reduce the risk of various health problems, including high blood pressure, coronary heart disease and osteoporosis.

To reap the health rewards of walking, you don't even have to walk at top speed. In fact, regular strolls at a pace of three miles per hour can reduce the risk of heart disease by raising levels of HDL (good) cholesterol, according to the Cooper Institute for Aerobics Research.

The problem with most exercise programs is the high drop-out rate. Following are tips for fitting walking into your everyday schedule and keeping your motivation level high.

- Recruit a friend to walk with you.

Companionship will make your walks more



enjoyable and help both of you stick to your program.

- When taking a bus, get off a few blocks before your stop.

- Listen to music or audio books to help pass the time.

- Start a lunchtime walking program at work.

- Pick a time of day and stick to it.

- When driving, park some blocks from your destination.

- For a change of pace or when the weather isn't ideal, head to a nearby mall.

- Walk in a scenic place, such as a park or other area that's pleasing to the eye and the spirit.

- Ask members of your women's group, bridge club or other social organization to join you on a walk before or after meetings.

- Challenge yourself to come up with new ways to make walking a part of your daily life.

Walking 101

Even though you've been walking almost all your life, you may benefit from a brushup on technique and shoe-buying. Walking the wrong way or in the wrong shoes can cause fatigue, muscle strain or injury.

- Keep your head straight (not tilted to either side) and chin parallel to the ground, shoulders level and loose, upper back erect, stomach in, and hips level and directly under your shoulders.
- Don't overstride; take natural steps.
- Swing your arms freely from the shoulders and slightly across your body.
- Buy your walking shoes in the afternoon. Why? Your feet can swell by half a size over the course of a day.
- Look for a shoe with moderate cushioning.
- Make sure the sole of the shoe bends easily at the ball of the foot.
- Look for a shoe with a rigid heel that doesn't bend when you press on it.

When you have to leave home

Admissions and appointments at other VA medical centers

If you are admitted to a VA medical center and require special treatment not available at your local hospital, you may be transferred to another VA. If you have private insurance, let staff know; it might be possible to get care locally. This is especially important if you are getting a long course of treatment like radiation or chemotherapy and will be away from your family.

If you are transferred to another VA hospital, a Patient Transfer Coordinator will make arrangements as soon as a bed is available. The Transfer Coordinator will make sure your medical records are available, get transportation and communicate your medical condition to the receiving team. You will be asked to sign a consent for the transfer. If possible, ask family or friends to bring these things before you are transferred:

- personal hygiene items
- slippers or shoes and socks
- clothing for when you are discharged
- a small amount of money

Important documents to bring with you:

- advance directives (living will or durable power of attorney for healthcare)

■ a list of family or friends who can be reached if you need assistance

- your insurance cards, Medicare, Medicaid, VA

When your specialized treatment is complete, you will be transferred back to your local VA if you still need hospitalization. If you are well enough to be discharged and you cannot arrange transportation, the VA will help transport you back to the city where you started. Before you are discharged, make sure you understand your discharge instructions, how to take any new medication and where your next appointment will be.

The VA Southwest Health Care Network is working hard to provide outstanding care to our veterans. If you have a problem or concern, don't hesitate to ask for help or contact the patient representative to assist you.

We value your input. During the month of September, our Network will be participating in a nationwide survey of enrollees. This survey, being conducted by VA, will help us garner information about the veterans enrolled in our Network. This data will help us with our future planning efforts to best meet your healthcare needs. So, during the month of September, if you receive a phone call from VA asking you to participate in a survey about VA enrollees, we hope you will take a few minutes to answer the survey. We thank you for your support of this effort!

Visit our Web site to get information on health and medication questions at
http://www.va.gov/visn18/HI/Health_Informatics.htm

For patient concerns or issues, contact our patient representative at (928) 776-6008.

Health Trends is designed to provide general health and wellness information and news about services provided by VISN 18. *Health Trends* is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, which should be obtained from your healthcare provider.

For information on smoking cessation contact Kevin Draper at (928) 445-4860 ext. 6549

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Northern Arizona VA Health Care System
500 Highway 89
Prescott, AZ 86313